

MIKEY LEUNG

How about guided tours of factories where rickshaws are made? Such tours can feed the Western appetite for oriental chariots. How about visiting shrimp hatcheries along the coastal belt? Al Gore's crusading documentary An Inconvenient Truth mentions Bangladesh as a battle-ground of climate change. Who knows, eco-tourists concerned with global warming may want to come to coastal Bangladesh to build their case against environmental violence.

In other words, we have to stretch the definition of tourism, deliver new models, make them educational, and offer insights into the country's culture, economic strengths, and shifting gender issues, among other possibilities. The educational tour can be neatly complemented by a relaxing eco-tour of the Sundarbans or the canals of Barisal.

I see a huge benefit in developing degree programs in tourism across government and private universities in Bangladesh. Irrelevant and trendy MBA programs could be morphed into tourism management degrees. The modern tourist no longer just sees, but listens too. There will soon be a robust need for tourist guides and training centres where future guides will become conversant in key languages of the tourism industry, such as English, Japanese, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Hindi, and Chinese.

The future belongs to people who can generate creative ideas. Google began as a simple idea and so did eBay, Amazon, and Grameen. The knowledge revolution that defines our present world suggests that ideas will be the most valuable commodity in the future.

As Richard Florida argues in his successful book The Rise of the Creative Class, in the 21st century, creative ideas will be the primary catalyst of economic growth. Are we thinking in these terms about tourism in Bangladesh?

As our plane took off from Mumbai on our way back to Washington, I solemnly asked my team members: which city was the most enlightening among Dhaka, Delhi, Chandigarh, Agra, Udaipur, and Mumbai? In Indian cities we mostly followed the touristy trail. Dhaka, they said in unison! I gazed down on the fleeting Mumbai landscape below, feeling gratified that my improvised tourism model worked and envisioning a time when planeloads of tourists would descend into Bangladesh.

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